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David P. Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision is Key to the World's Future*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI: 2013; 477 pp.: 9780802844200, £23.99/\$35 (hbk)

In this large volume, David Gushee seeks to make the case that the concept of the 'sacredness of human life' is fundamental to biblically-based Christian theology. Beginning with the Old and New Testaments and patristic theologians and proceeding through John Locke and Immanuel Kant, Gushee advocates for a view of humanity as intrinsically sacred, rather than as deriving its dignity from divine sovereignty or some other element of doctrine. In chapter 11 this vision is broadened to encompass the sacredness of nonhuman life in an ethic of creation care. This development is important because it points toward the contradictions in the anthropocentrism of many 'sacredness of life' proponents.

Examining a series of current ethical challenges to the sacredness of specifically human life, Gushee seeks to advance beyond the ongoing polemics in the United States between Christian liberals and conservatives. He achieves this by refocusing debates on the wider contexts of the controversies. For instance, abortion rates, which are highest in poor and coloured communities, will most likely be reduced if society cares better for the vulnerable and if more relationships are covenantally founded. Advances in biotechnology are worrying because they are occurring against a backdrop of socially unequal access to healthcare and the industry's increasing political clout. This view of life as sacred within a large matrix of relationships and commitments is persuasive. In practice, the sacredness of life is unlikely to be promoted by a succession of heroic stands in the face of specific moral dilemmas.

In places, however, the book suffers from an overabundance of material. Does the reader really need to be told the many different definitions of the sacred yielded by a trawl through dictionaries, or that a research assistant conducted an online database count of the number of articles in which the term featured? Ninety pages are devoted to Nietzsche and Nazism, but they make a limited contribution to the argument. The most arresting portions of the book are descriptions of imperial and fascist atrocities, but notwithstanding their awfulness such accounts should not be needed to hold the reader's attention.

Gushee's argument has a strong cumulative effect, although could have been made more concisely and thereby more powerfully. As it stands, I remain unconvinced that the sacredness of human life is itself a foundational concept in biblically-grounded theology, rather than a concept that rightly emerges from other doctrines such as creation or redemption. Moreover, in a book of this length that claims to be authoritative and comprehensive it is strange that no attention is given to major medieval or reformed figures such as Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin, nor to theological critics of Nietzsche and fascism such as Henri de Lubac. Nevertheless, Gushee collates much interesting material and his book is likely to provoke considerable debate with the constituencies to which it is directed.

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